



Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

Sixth Sunday of Easter A



Karlskirche, Vienna. Fresco by Johann Michael Rottmayr (1714): Dove (Holy Spirit)-



Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

Prayer to Seek God

Father, in your goodness grant me the intellect to comprehend you,
the perception to discern you,
and the reason to appreciate you.

In your kindness endow me with the diligence to look for you,
the wisdom to discover you,
and the spirit to apprehend you.

In your graciousness bestow on me a heart to contemplate you,
ears to hear you,
eyes to see you,

and a tongue to speak of you.

In your mercy confer on me a conversation pleasing to you,
the patience to wait for you,
and the perseverance to long for you.

Grant me a perfect end - your holy presence.

Amen.

*Saint Benedict of Nursia, 5th c. Monk and Founder of
Benedictines*

Catholic
**Faith, Life
& Creed**
Version 2.0

© Mary Birmingham,
2011. All rights reserved.

Breaking Open the
Word worksheets
connect with *Catholic
Faith, Life, & Creed*
Doctrinal Sessions.

Editor: Bill Huebsch

Published cooperatively by
TeamRCIA.com and
PastoralPlanning.com.

Liturgical Context

- ▶ Today's liturgy is a reminder that the Church exists to generate itself. Images of Holy Spirit, laying on of hands, baptism are all prominent themes.
- ▶ Jesus promises to send his Spirit to be with the Church. John and Peter lay hands on new converts to the faith and in so doing confer the Holy Spirit upon them.
- ▶ Easter season is an important time for us to reflect on the sacraments of initiation and presence of the Holy Spirit in our sacramental signs. Through the waters of baptism we receive the Holy Spirit and this is also true in the sacred chrism of confirmation.
- ▶ During this Easter season we continue to remember and make present the Easter redemption offered to us by Christ through his saving death and resurrection. It takes seven weeks to celebrate, proclaim, and remember the entire paschal event of Easter.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

First Reading: Acts 8:5-8, 14-17

- ▶ Stephen was the first Christian martyr. After his death, the Greek speaking Christians left Jerusalem as they were the first to endure persecution.
- ▶ Rather than deter the missionary efforts of the first church they were strengthened.
- ▶ Philip one of the famous seven who was appointed to serve at table in last' weeks reading from acts went to Samaria to preach the Good News.
- ▶ Philip's message was greeted with great enthusiasm.
- ▶ It is amazing that the people of Samaria were so opened to hear the Gospel preached to them. The history between the Jews of Samaria (Israel--the northern kingdom) and the Jews of Jerusalem (Judea—the southern kingdom) was tense.
- ▶ The Jews of the southern kingdom believed the Jews of Samaria to be unclean for yielding to the inclusion of foreign gods during the Babylonian invasion of the north.
- ▶ Jesus invited the Jews of Samaria to turn away from their foreign gods and to worship the one true God—the God of Spirit and Truth.
- ▶ The people were ready to hear Jesus' message. The harvest of the north was ripe for picking!
- ▶ Peter and John stayed in Jerusalem but were fortunate enough to avoid persecution.
- ▶ Peter and John laid hands and conferred the Holy Spirit on all the new converts Philip had evangelized.
- ▶ Jesus promised that the work of the apostles would extend to all the ends of the earth.

- ▶ It continues today in the sacraments of the Church—baptism, confirmation and Eucharist in particular through the sacramental signs of water, oil and the laying on of hands.
- ▶ Philip was instrumental in taking the Christian message to the Gentile world. The Acts of the Apostles chronicles the journey taken by ministers of the Gospel to the far corners of their world.
- ▶ Even though Philip baptized new converts, his baptism did not confer the Holy Spirit. The people had to wait for Peter and John to lay hands upon them in order to receive the Spirit. Since confirmation was not known as a separate sacrament at that time, this is not a proof for the celebration of a separate rite of confirmation. If does, however, lay the ground work for the later distinction between the two sacraments.



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ What are the implications for your life in this reading?
- ▶ Imagine what it must have been like to preach the Good News knowing you could be martyred for doing so. Even though we enjoy religious freedom in our country, in what way do Christians today experience persecution for their faith?
- ▶ Have you ever been persecuted for what you believe?
- ▶ What is the message inherent in this reading about persecution for the sake of the Gospel?
- ▶ Is there any person in your world who needs to hear the Gospel preached to them?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of us sharing the Good News of the Gospel with others?

Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:15-18

- ▶ Peter's community experienced persecution.
- ▶ The ultimate message to his readers is to maintain trust in the risen Christ no matter what befalls them.
- ▶ The letter is a reminder that even though the Christian life is reason for great joy and the realization of all our hopes, it is not without trial and tribulation.
- ▶ Jesus himself suffered, died and rose again.
- ▶ Christians will ultimately follow in his footsteps.
- ▶ Christians who are faithful to their baptismal call can expect hardship and suffering.
- ▶ Christians are to remain steadfast and prepare their hearts for the onslaught when

it comes. They are to keep their eyes of the *One* who endured persecution, torture and death for the sake of all sinners.

- ▶ Suffering finds meaning when joined to the suffering of Christ.
- ▶ Faithful Christians can expect to suffer for their faith.
- ▶ There is no greater witness to the love of Christ than to lay down one's life not just for a friend, but for one's enemy.
- ▶ The Christian is called upon to love unto death—love that leads to the cross!
- ▶ Christian love is a self-sacrificing love.
- ▶ German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer who died in a Nazi concentration camp said it well:
 - When a man really gives up trying to make something out of himself—a saint or a converted sinner or a church man, a righteous or unrighteous man...When in the fullness of tasks, questions, successes or ill-haps, experiences and perplexities, a man throws himself into the arms of God...Then he awakes with Christ in Gethsemane. That is faith, that is metanoia and it is thus that he becomes a man and a Christian. How can a man wax arrogant if in a *this-sided life* he shares in the suffering of God?"
(*Das Zeugnis eines Boten*, Geneva, 1945, 46-47.)



Mystagogy

reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group.

- ▶ In what way is this reading a comforting or consoling word?
- ▶ What is the primary theme of this reading and what does it have to do with our everyday lives?
- ▶ The Church teaches that when we join our suffering to the suffering of Christ we are given the privilege of participating in his ongoing work of redemption in the world. What does that mean to you?
- ▶ Can you envision a situation in your everyday life in which you might be called upon to join your suffering to the suffering of Christ?

Gospel: John 14:15-21

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?

- ▶ Today's Gospel continues Jesus' farewell address to his disciples.
- ▶ Jesus reminds his followers how he will continue to be present after he is gone—presence in absence.
- ▶ Jesus tells them that he will send an advocate—he will send the Holy Spirit to continue his saving mission in the world.
- ▶ Followers of Christ know what it means to be loved unconditionally. They are to take the love they have been given out to the world.
- ▶ Disciples will face resistance. They will undergo persecution for their efforts, but Jesus' Spirit will strengthen them.
- ▶ Disciples are to go forward fortified by the great commandments Jesus gave them. They are to love the Lord their God with their entire heart, mind and soul and they are to extend that love to their neighbor and to themselves.
- ▶ Jesus taught them what it means to love to that extent; it means to love unto death—to be willing to lay down one's life as Jesus himself laid down his life—to extend paschal love.
- ▶ Evidence of this paschal love will be illustrated by the way in which we love the downtrodden, the poor, oppressed and marginalized in our midst. It is easy to love the "loveable" ones, not so easy to love the "un-loveable" members of Christ's Body.
- ▶ The love of which Jesus spoke is only possible through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Left to our own devices we are not capable of loving as Christ taught us. The Spirit strengthens us to love as Jesus loved.
- ▶ Jesus' love for his friends is palpable in these verses. He knows they will be distraught. He tries to ease their shock, comfort them and prepare them for his death and for his absence. He knows that when the dust settles they will remember his words to them.
- ▶ He promises to remain with them—that he will abide deep within them.
- ▶ Jesus promises that even though he will be physically absent, he will be ever-present through the indwelling of his Holy Spirit.
- ▶ Once they experience the indwelling of the Spirit they will also know the Father and that Jesus and the Father are one.
- ▶ The word Paraclete means counselor. It is a juridical term akin to one who advocates for a defendant in a trial.
- ▶ Jesus would be tried in a phony human court by human standards. He would be convicted and sentenced to death.
- ▶ The Advocate/Paraclete would come and vindicate him.
- ▶ Then would the world stand accused and Jesus would be exonerated.
- ▶ Jesus was not a sinner. For a Jewish person that was a particularly difficult thing to believe. The cross was their stumbling block. How could Jesus be who he said he was-- who his followers said he was? How could God ever allow his *Anointed One* to endure such a defiled, unclean manner of death? God would never, never allow it. Thus, Jesus must have been a sinner after all. God would never allow such defilement.
- ▶ Jesus, however, allowed himself to be defiled for the sake of all the defiled.

- ▶ As Advocate, the Spirit will not only plead Jesus' case but the Spirit will plead the case of all believers.
- ▶ Jesus will offer the first line of defense for his disciples through the sacrifice of his life. Jesus will plead humanity's case before a heavenly court and win their eternal freedom by his death and resurrection.
- ▶ Jesus continues to defend believers from the right hand of God's throne.
- ▶ The Spirit's role is to open hearts and minds to the truth about who Jesus is and what his mission is in the world.
- ▶ One cannot know the Spirit until he or she has first come to faith in Jesus himself. And...to know Jesus is to know his Father as he promised.
- ▶ Thus, ultimately today's Gospel is an invitation to grow in intimate union with the Triune God.
- ▶ Today's Gospel teaches us important truths about the Trinity. Jesus illustrates that God is one—that the Trinity is comprised of three Persons who know and love one another. The Father, Son and Spirit glorify one another.
- ▶ The Godhead is a life-force. The Persons of the Trinity commune with one another. Each person holds the other in total, committed love and acceptance at the center of God's being. God's entire interior life is other-centered.
- ▶ When we glorify the Father, Son and Spirit, we can do no less than adore God for the purity of beauty and love that emanates from the three Persons.
- ▶ Jesus loved and demonstrated intimate union with his Father. We hear in today's Gospel that the Spirit "has Jesus' back" as the contemporary saying goes. Mutual love flows from each Person.
- ▶ Each Person centers God's love on the other Persons—adoring and serving one another as we are called to adore and serve them as well.
- ▶ The Trinity is the personification of true and utter happiness--sublime happiness for all eternity. The Father, Son and Spirit have been pouring abundant love upon one another from all eternity—there never was a time when such love was not present. The thought defies imagination!
- ▶ Rather than self-centeredness (to which we humans are prone) the Trinity is characterized by their mutual, self-giving love toward one another.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See the appendix for an example.

- ▶ What spoke to you the most in today's Gospel?
- ▶ What does today's reading teach us about the Holy Spirit?
- ▶ What evidence is there in your life that the Holy Spirit dwells within you?
- ▶ Do you really believe that you can count on the Holy Spirit to go with you and be your advocate as you try to live the Christian life? What does that concretely mean?
- ▶ When it comes to building the kingdom of God in your world, what gifts does the Holy Spirit need to strengthen within you?
- ▶ What does Jesus tell you that you must do when you go out to preach the Gospel? What is your responsibility?

- ▶ What does this Gospel teach us about the Trinity?
- ▶ What does the Trinity teach us about relationships?

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?
- ▶ Do you really believe that you can count on the Holy Spirit to go with you and be your advocate as you try to live the Christian life? What does that concretely mean?

Concluding Prayer

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR
Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.

APPENDIX

The Spirit goes with us and promises to be our advocate. When we choose to believe that truth, get out of the way and allow the Spirit to act, it is amazing what can happen.

Many years ago I was in a group in which some people were very unhappy with my leadership. As a result of a specific drama in the parish there were rumors afloat that perhaps it was time for me to leave.

Exaggerated claims and overstatements were made. I prayed to be open to hearing what I needed to hear in the midst of the trial at hand, but much of it was overblown misdirected anger.

Someone came to me in midweek and told me that I would have a contingency converge upon me (very similar to a mock court situation) in order to publically challenge and embarrass me.

Throughout the week I prayed for the wisdom and strength to deal with the situation as Christ would have me deal with it, not as my bruised ego wanted to deal with it (as I so often had done in the past).

The fated evening arrived. I braced myself and when the accusers stood up I prayed, “Holy Spirit, give me the wisdom and the words.” I was amazed at what happened next. I heard that small still voice within say, “Do not worry what to say when they drag you into courts for the sake of my name. I will put words in your mouth.”

Fear left me. I felt nothing but deep, abiding Presence. I surprised myself at the words that came forth. They were loving, understanding words. They acknowledged the need to listen to those with concerns, but they reminded the folks that we had a common purpose and could accomplish it much better through unity rather than division. I asked them to come to me with any future concerns, angers or frustrations and that I would, to the best of my ability, be open to hear whatever they had to share with me or whatever critique they would want to offer as long as it was offered in a spirit of friendship and Christian love.

What followed took my breath away. The entire group stood up and applauded. They thanked me for hearing them. It was a huge turning point. The animosities melted after that night and we did go on from there to reconcile and forge a common purpose. And all because I got out of the way and let the Holy Spirit do what the Spirit does best—be our Advocate/Paraclete/Reconciler—the ongoing presence of the Father and Son in our lives.

The entire event was a huge lesson for me.



Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Evangelization
Ecumenism
Baptism
Confirmation
Symbols of Bread and Wine
Morality
Moral Decision Making
Holy Spirit

Revelation I or II
Sacraments
Eschatology, Heaven, Hell and Purgatory
Church and Ecclesiology
Church Structure
Jesus Christ
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

EVANGELIZATION

The author of Luke and Acts relate the story of the development of the emerging Christian Church. The Easter season tells the story of the Church. The first reading relates the story of Phillip who, after fleeing persecution in Jerusalem, went to Samaria to preach the Good News and work miracles in Jesus' name. The sacraments of initiation require that we live our baptismal role as priest to serve God's people, prophet to proclaim God's word through our words and actions and king to lead people to Christ. It is thus fitting that we focus our attention on our Easter faith and what Jesus commanded us to do--go out and preach the Good News to all the nations. Today's doctrinal session will focus on what the Church teaches about EVANGELIZATION.

ECUMENISM

The first reading relates the story of Phillip who, after fleeing persecution in Jerusalem, went to Samaria to preach the Good News and work miracles in Jesus' name. Jews considered Samaritans outsiders, but Phillip resisted and tore down the barriers of religious prejudice; he shared the Good News with them. He is an example for us today of the attitude we must have when reaching out to people of other faith traditions. It is thus fitting that today we focus our doctrinal session on what the Church teaches about ECUMENISM.

BAPTISM

The first reading from the Acts of the Apostles relates the story of Phillip who baptized those who wanted to be baptized. At the Easter Vigil the elect were baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. The liturgies of the Easter season make the sacraments of initiation an important focus for our doctrinal session. Thus it is fitting that our doctrinal session will focus on the **SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM**.

SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION

The first reading from the Acts of the Apostles relates the story of Phillip who baptized those who wanted to be baptized. He waited for Peter and John to lay hands on them to impart the Holy Spirit. Some scholars caution against considering this the actual origin of the sacrament of confirmation. It does, however, echo the future liturgical development of the sacrament. The sacrament of confirmation anoints the person with God's Spirit and conforms their life intimately to Christ's life—thus strengthening them to fully participate in the Paschal Mystery of Christ that was manifested par excellence at the Easter Vigil. Through this sacrament we are given the strength to profess faith in Christ. During the weeks of Easter we have a front row seat watching the early Church go out and spread the Christian faith when we hear the Acts of the Apostles proclaimed each week. Thus today it is fitting that we focus our attention on the **SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION**.

SYMBOLS OF BREAD AND WINE

Every Eucharistic liturgy re-presents the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary and his resurrection from the dead. At the Easter Vigil the elect were baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. The liturgies of the Easter season are an invitation to focus our attention on the sacraments of initiation. The sacrament of Eucharist fully incorporates the neophyte into the Eucharistic community. When we eat the Bread of Life and drink his Blood we share fully in his Paschal Mystery. The sacraments of initiation incorporate the neophyte into the Paschal Mystery of Christ—his life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension and the sending of the Spirit that was manifested par excellence in the Easter Vigil liturgy. Thus today it is fitting that we focus our attention on the sacramental **SYMBOLS OF BREAD AND WINE**.

MORALITY

Jesus insists in his farewell address that Christians are to live the great commandments of love. They are to live the moral life. It is thus fitting that we focus our doctrinal session on the implications of the Easter event—to live lives in accord with the Gospel—to live the moral life. Thus we will focus our attention on the **MORAL LIFE**.

MORAL DECISION MAKING

Jesus insists in his farewell address that Christians are to live the great commandments of love. They are to live the moral life. It is thus fitting that we focus our doctrinal session on the implications of the Easter event—to live lives in accord with the Gospel—to live the moral life. How do we live the moral life? We make choices. We choose to live the moral life or we do not. We choose to make a moral decision. Thus it is fitting that our

doctrinal session today will focus on MORAL DECISION MAKING.

HOLY SPIRIT

Jesus prepares his disciples for his absence by promising to send the Holy Spirit. Jesus promises that he will return to them, yes, at the second coming, but sooner than that in the Spirit who will dwell in the hearts of the people. It is thus appropriate that we focus our attention on what the Church teaches about the HOLY SPIRIT.

REVELATION I or II

Jesus prepares his disciples for his absence through his farewell discourses. Jesus is the revelation of God—he is the ultimate sacrament of God. Scriptures reveal Christ to us and Christ reveals and is God. It is thus a most appropriate time to focus our attention on REVELATION I or II.

SACRAMENTS

Sacraments continue Christ's saving mission in our day and our time. We are given access to his ministry through the sacraments. The Church teaches that the sacraments of the Church manifest Christ's own Paschal Mystery—his passion, death and resurrection. We remember what Christ did and in the process the Paschal Mystery is made present to us. We are given access to his healing, reconciling and salvific mission through the sacraments. It is thus most appropriate that we focus our attention today on what the Church teaches about sacraments—the celebrations/rituals that bring the healing, reconciling, saving mission of Christ into our midst—that make present Christ's life, passion, death, resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Thus today our doctrinal session will focus on what the Church teaches about SACRAMENTS.

ESCHATOLOGY, HEAVEN, HELL AND PURGATORY

Jesus prepares his disciples for his absence. He will return to his Father, but he will send his Spirit to dwell in the hearts of the people. He reminds believers of the eternal life that awaits them. His eschatological farewell address provides a fitting opportunity to focus our doctrinal session on ESCHATOLOGY, HEAVEN, HELL AND PURGATORY.

CHURCH AND ECCLESIOLOGY

Throughout the Easter season, Luke, the author of Acts and the Gospel of Luke charts the development of the emerging church—the fledgling communities. The church exists to establish the reign of God now as Christians await the coming of Christ in the age to come. It is thus appropriate to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about CHURCH AND ECCLESIOLOGY.

CHURCH STRUCTURE

Throughout the Easter season, Luke, the author of Acts and the Gospel of Luke charts the development of the emerging church—the fledgling communities. The church exists to establish the reign of God now as Christians await the coming of Christ in the age to come. The church was unified in heart and purpose. They shared all things in common. They upheld the ideal Church as they worked to achieve that end. Ministry was needed

in the community and a clear definition of roles. Those roles continue today. It is thus appropriate to focus our attention on what the Church teaches about **CHURCH STRUCTURE**.

JESUS CHRIST

Today's Gospel relates Jesus' farewell address to his disciples. He reveals his identity. He is the Truth, the Way and the Life. It is thus most fitting that during this Easter season we focus our attention on Jesus Christ and what we believe about him. Today is an appropriate time to focus our attention on **JESUS CHRIST**.

EUCCHARIST SERIES:

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Thus any Sunday would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part ____ of the Eucharistic Series.